



**THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON**

SEP 13 2019

**The Honorable Brian Mast
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515**

Dear Congressman Mast:

I write with concern about several misleading public statements you have recently made or been party to regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) decision to reclaim office space you have been using at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center (VAMC), Veteran suicides, and VA transparency.

During a September 12, 2019, Fox News interview you participated in, it was implied, without evidence, that VA's decision to reclaim the office space you have been using at the West Palm Beach VAMC for clinical use was related to a Congressional hearing that took place more than 5 months ago. VA's decision to reclaim the office space in question is not related to any Congressional hearing and is rooted instead in the need to maximize the clinical space in VA medical facilities. VA intends to use the space your shared office is currently encumbering for the facility's Veteran smoking cessation program.

During the same interview, you also falsely implied that you could not conduct Congressional oversight and constituent services unless you have an office inside the West Palm Beach VAMC. To the contrary, you are free to conduct Congressional oversight and constituent services from your district or Washington-based offices. You are one of only six Members of Congress who currently have office space in a VA facility. None of the other 529 Members of Congress, all of whom conduct oversight and constituent services, are making such demands.

As evidenced by your own proposed legislation, you have recognized that VA has no legal authority to offer space to you or any Member of Congress; however, if deemed appropriate and unobtrusive towards clinical productivity by the West Palm Beach VAMC Facility Director, your staff may be afforded the opportunity to hold monthly mobile office hours at the facility in one of the VAMC's common areas. The Facility Director may also decide to offer you time for a town hall on the premises to further constituent outreach.

Furthermore, in a September 12, 2019, press release, you stated, without evidence, that VA's decision to reclaim the office space in question was done to avoid transparency and accountability. To be clear, under this Administration, the Department is more transparent and accountable than ever before. Since President Trump's inauguration, VA became the first hospital system in the Nation to post online our wait times, opioid prescription rates, and chief executive travel.

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President Trump also signed into law the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act and established the VA Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection. This office was created to help protect employees who expose problems within VA and to use all available authorities to discipline or terminate any VA manager or employee who has violated the public's trust and failed to carry out their duties. During the same period, VA has fired more than 7,600 VA employees who were not serving our Veterans in the way they deserve.

Your implication about lack of progress on suicide and mental health flies in the face of everything President Trump has done. He is the first and only President to declare suicide prevention a national health priority, and you know that under this President, we not only have same day mental health services, but also the largest mental health budget in history.

In the same September 12, 2019, press release, you stated that "No other Federal agency has been so plagued by crisis after crisis as the VA has." While that was true during the Obama Administration, under President Trump, VA has done more in the last two and a half years than previous administrations have in decades to reform the Department and improve health care and benefits for our Nation's patriots. VA has made groundbreaking progress, particularly in the areas of accountability, transparency, and efficiency, while enjoying an unprecedented series of legislative successes.

I believe we share the goals of helping Veterans and improving VA services. But providing Veterans and the public at large with inaccurate information in your capacity as a lawmaker undermines your stated message about helping Veterans and honoring their service to our great Nation.

Sincerely,



Robert L. Wilkie